

Who Is a Christian, Part 4

After some reflection, I realize that my last letter related to this subject was somewhat complicated and technical and no fun to read at all. In this article I will expand on what I wrote last time and will attempt to clarify the conclusions of the last article in a way that hopefully will help and not hinder the message. In an effort to answer the question “Who Is a Christian,” in the next few postings, we will look at three aspects of Christian character: Practice, Passion, and Persecution. This article will deal with Practice.

PRACTICE

Of the 62 evidences that John presented in his letter (1 John) by which a person might evaluate their standing before God, the largest majority of these evidences have to do, not with what a person professes, but with what they practice. In other words, one’s life-style is a much more reliable testimony of one’s love for Christ and evidence of one’s identity as a Christian than one’s words. You have probably heard the saying, “Actions speak louder than words.” That is somewhat the message John is attempting to get across.

Before going any further, we need to be reminded of a very important point. An apple tree is not called an apple tree with an expectation or hope that it will then produce apples. Pear trees look very much like apple trees, but calling a pear tree an apple tree will not cause it to produce apples. An apple tree is called an apple tree because it produces a specific fruit called apples. We may have a doubt about what kind of tree we are looking at, but once we see the apples, all of our doubts are extinguished.

However, there are seasons when the apple tree is not bearing fruit and a person may not recognize it as an apple tree. If they ask someone who knows the tree, that person can testify on behalf of the tree that it is, in fact, an apple tree. We may accept their testimony, but later, when the season is right, we will look for the apples, not because we do not believe the person’s testimony, but because we desire confirmation, even though we may not be consciously aware of the desire. It is simply human nature.

In the same way, John’s list of 62 evidences is not a list of things a person *should* do or *ought* to do to prove that they are a Christian. This is a list of things that a Christian *will* do. This list is not a prescription – or a list of requirements – for a Christian, but the description of a Christian. A person may testify or profess that he or she is a Christian, and their testimony or profession may even be supported by other people. But their fruit, or the absence thereof, will confirm to us the truth of their testimony or profession.

Recently, someone posted on Facebook an article that questioned whether or not President Obama is a Christian. One reader took great offense at such a question and responded quite strongly in the comments following the posting. In part, he said the following:

...no one can say he's not a Christian. You don't know his mind. Whether or not he acts the way you think he should doesn't matter. You claim it's about a "relationship" - you don't know his. If he professes to worship God & accepts Christ as his savior - he's a Christian (by definition). Period...If you profess to be a Christian, you are one.

According to this person, all that a person has to do to prove he is a Christian is say he is a Christian. Clearly, a profession of faith is essential in the process of becoming and acknowledging one's standing before God, or the New Testament would not put such emphasis on it.

If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Rom. 10:9, ESV)

Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering. (Heb. 10:23, KJV)

But is simply making a profession of faith – is simply saying that one believes in Christ enough to give assurance that a person is saved? Is simply confessing that one believes that Jesus is the Messiah and recognizes Him as Savior enough in and of itself to serve as a proof of one's salvation?

The Facebook personality mentioned earlier commented further about the subject of faith as it relates to one's being a Christian:

Any aspect of religion is about faith. It begins and ends there...His actions do not define his faith. Not now, not before, not ever. Only by what he professes will you ever know (whether or not he is a Christian)...

The key words in these comments are "His actions do not define his faith." There is a degree of truth in those words, but that point will require another discussion. However, this person appears to believe that there is no direct connection between one's profession and one's practice when it comes to proving one's salvation.

This person appears to believe, as so many people do, that all one has to do to confirm that they are a Christian is to announce to others that he does believe. One of the scriptures most commonly quoted to support this idea is John 3:16. However, no theology can be built on only one or even a few scriptures. The Bible must be understood as a unified book that teaches a consistent message throughout.

The Bible, and especially the New Testament, teaches that a statement of faith or a statement of belief is insufficient evidence for determining whether or not a person is saved unless that

statement is supported by the practices of a person's life. Believing is certainly an essential part of the salvation process, but simply stating that one is a believer is not sufficient evidence for proving that a person is a Christian.

James, the brother of Jesus, wrote a book that is included in the Bible. Like the small letter of 1 John, it is also located near the end of the New Testament. In his book, James dealt quite frankly with the idea that simply saying that one believes is enough. In James 2:19, he wrote, "You say you have faith, for you believe that there is one God. Good for you! Even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror." (NLT)

In James 2:14, he asked, "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith (he believes) but does not have works? Can that faith (believing) save him?" The questions here are rhetorical, meaning that the answer is generally known and requires no verbal or written answer.

Yet James goes on to tell us that the answer to these questions is "No" when he writes, "So faith (belief) by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." (James 2:17) In plain language, a profession of faith that is not supported by the practical application of that faith is not a profession of faith at all and is useless for purposes of salvation.

In the book of Matthew, and more specifically, in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), Jesus taught this very same principle to His listeners. Near the end of His sermon He said to His disciples, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." (Matt. 7:21)

Basically, then, those who are welcomed into Heaven – those who are truly saved – are not those who simply profess Christ as Lord, or even those who profess Christ and are busy doing benevolent or church-related work. Those who are truly part of the kingdom of God are those who profess Christ as Lord and who express their faith by doing works that fulfill the will of God.

That is the reason God saves us in the first place. Most people think Christianity is first of all about being rescued from hell and going to heaven and having our sins forgiven and living forever. All these things are truly among the benefits of salvation, but God's primary purpose for saving us is so that He will get glory by the works He does through us.

For we are his (God's) workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Eph. 2:10, ESV)

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Cor. 10:31, ESV)